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SUBJECT: CODEL TAYLOR MEETS PANAMANIAN PRESIDENT MARTIN  
TORRIJOS, INSPECTS DARIEN BORDER REGION, VIEWS JCET AT  
FORMER FT. SHERMAN

#### SUMMARY

1. (SBU) In a 48-hour visit during February 20-22, Codel Taylor toured the Darien border region by helicopter, met with senior Panamanian officials (including President Martin Torrijos) and viewed a joint combined training exercise (JCET) in Chagres National Park (former Ft. Sherman) that included U.S. Navy SEALs and members of the Panamanian Public Forces (PPF). Rep. Taylor told Torrijos that he is very favorably impressed by the stronger border police presence and improved scope of its mission, compared with several years ago. He also was impressed by Canal maintenance and modernization plans, commenting separately to Canal Administrator Alberto Aleman Zubieta on the "symbiotic" economic relationship between Canal expansion and U.S. Gulf states (such as Taylor's home state of Mississippi). End Summary.

#### GOP Goes All Out

2. (SBU) The Panamanian government (GOP) worked hard to make Codel Taylor a success. Vice Foreign Minister Ricardo Duran, Panama Canal Administrator (ACP) Alberto Aleman Zubieta, and Ambassador to the U.S. Federico Humbert briefed the Codel shortly after its Feb. 20 arrival. Minister of Government and Justice (MOGJ) Hector Aleman accompanied the Codel during its Feb. 21-22 tour of the Darien border province, where Panama City Mayor (and presidential hopeful) Juan Carlos Navarro joined the group. Panamanian National Police (PNP) and National Maritime Service (SMN) Director Generals Gustavo Perez and Ricardo Traad escorted the Codel during its trip to Ft. Sherman. Foreign Minister Samuel Lewis attended the impromptu Feb. 22 courtesy call with President Torrijos. And Torrijos lent the Codel the Presidential helicopter for Taylor's trip to the Darien.

#### Codel Taylor

3. (U) (Note: The four-member Codel comprised Rep. Gene Taylor (D-Mississippi); House Armed Services Committee (HASC) counsel Jim Schweiter; U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) legislative director Col. Chris Perkins; and U.S. Army legislative liaison LtCol Mike Legg. Charge and POL Counselor accompanied Codel on its visit to Darien. End note.)

#### In the Darien

4. (SBU) Codel Taylor's objective in Panama was to monitor conditions in Panama's Darien border region with Colombia, a sparsely populated (circa 50,000 inhabitants) but ecologically rich province, which has suffered from instability in recent years due to spillover from Colombia's civil war and from environmental degradation. The GOP's presence in the region, aside from security forces, is weak. Codel (accompanied by MOGJ Aleman and PNP Commissioner Modesto Sauri) flew Feb. 21 in two rotary wing aircraft (including the presidential Sikorsky) to Meteti (Darien's largest town) to refuel, Puerto Obaldia (on the Caribbean coast at the Colombian border), the riverside interior village of Boca de Cupe, and Darien administrative capital La Palma on the Tuira River. Codel visited PNP police garrisons at each location and received briefings on the local security situation.

5. (SBU) Small contingents of Colombian FARC (and also AUC) guerrillas have used Darien province over the years as a resupply and rest area, PNP officials told the Codel. In recent years, reinforced militarized police border contingents in population centers, such as Puerto Obaldia (with around 80 police) and Boca de Cupe (around 140 police), have countered the FARC and pushed it into unpopulated areas. The PNP (with U.S. training and equipment) has brought greater stability to the border region, although it is not strong enough to drive the FARC out of Panama altogether. In a place without roads, travel on foot is difficult and time consuming. PNP officials said that they often apprehend Ecuadorian, Peruvian, Chinese, and other migrants who try

pass through the border region on their way to the United States. Also, narcotraffickers use the Atlantic and Pacific coastal seas to move narcotics. PNP officials said they had seized hundreds of kilograms of cocaine recently and that interrogations of suspects had aided the PNP to seize arms shipments in other parts of Panama.

#### From Nature Lodge To Ft. Sherman

16. (SBU) After meeting with Darien governor Juana Lopez and La Palma Mayor Benigno Ivarguen, Codel proceeded from La Palma via the Tuira River by NAS-donated 29-foot patrol craft to an isolated nature lodge at Punta Patino to spend the night, where Panama Mayor Juan Carlos Navarro joined the group. On Feb. 22 Codel returned to Panama City where it boarded a UH-60 U.S. military (Blackhawk) helicopter for the 30-minute flight to former Ft. Sherman to view the Ft. Sherman JCET in Chagres National Park. The exhibition consisted of simulated firing and the extraction of troops via motor launch from the far bank of the Chagres as the Codel watched from Fort San Lorenzo, a 17th century Spanish fort and tourist site. After returning to Panama, Codel met with President Torrijos.

#### Meeting With Torrijos

17. (SBU) Rep. Taylor told Torrijos that he had followed the Colombian civil war closely and was interested in border conditions in Colombia's neighbors, including Panama. Taylor praised the PNP's substantially greater numbers, especially compared with what he saw during his previous visit to the Darien several years before, and said the caliber of the PNP forces was "outstanding." Taylor also praised Panama Canal maintenance and modernization plans, adding that the "naysayers" on the subject of the Canal transfer had been proven wrong. Taylor urged the GOP to make known its specific construction plans so that U.S. ports can make adjustments. For instance, ACP Administrator Aleman had mentioned plans to increase lock depth to 50 feet (from 36 feet), which will have implications for Gulf ports, Taylor said. FM Lewis told Taylor of GOP plans to send teams to U.S. ports to explain the Canal plans once they are made public and approved by Panamanian voters in a referendum that is expected to take place in late 2005 or early 2006.

18. (SBU) Mentioning fiscal and social security reforms and a planned late-2005 Canal referendum, Torrijos said his government is engaged in making structural changes for the benefits of the population. Panama could become a key anti-terrorism partner of the United States, he added. On the Free Trade Agreement, Panama wants treatment at least equal to CAFTA. FM Lewis argued that Panama is hardly a trade threat to the United States, adding that the GOP's biggest preoccupation at the FTA talks is how to protect its key sectors of rice, poultry, pork, and sugar. Torrijos asked for Taylor's vote on the FTA when it comes to the U.S. Congress.

19. (U) Codel Taylor did not have the opportunity to clear this message.

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